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BARRIERS TO KNOWLEDGE FOR PRACTICE:
THE CASEWORK EFFECTIVENESS DILEMMA

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I. INTRODUCTION

Within the social work community there exists an acknowledged need for evaluating the effectiveness of casework services. This need developed and was sustained over time because of pressure exerted by the profession for internal accountability: understanding practice to improve intervention and insure professional growth.¹ But more recently, evaluation endeavors arose from pressure to demonstrate external accountability: the need to prove the validity of casework services.² This shift was produced by the change in casework financing from private voluntary contributions to public tax dollars. Claims made in the early 1960's that expansion of casework services could reduce existing, and prevent future, social problems brought governmental funding of service delivery.³ But, at the same time, receipt of public tax dollars necessitated verification of those claims to justify the increased support. To this end, the number of casework evaluation studies undertaken since 1962 provides evidence of the field's commitment to answering the basic accountability question, "is casework effective?".⁴

Despite the field's apparent commitment and increased use of evaluation research, there has been little impact on our understanding of casework effectiveness.⁵ Briar identifies four reasons to explain this phenomenon:

- 1)...to ignore the research on effectiveness and try to preserve the faith and confidence that once prevailed
- 2)...that the problem itself is not important
- 3)...to recognize the research findings but then try to explain them away
- 4)...cynicism and despair associated with a feeling that social workers are useless⁶

In his analysis, Briar correctly describes the field's response to evaluation efforts. However, his analysis (as well as others') fails to identify those dilemmas which help create and maintain the profession's stance toward casework evaluation.⁷ To date, no systematic analysis of these dilemmas exists. This article is devoted to that task. While there are no guarantees that identification will lead to eliminating the barriers that prevent adequate evaluation, it seems a necessary first step toward this goal.

II. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In developing an analytical framework we did not attempt a re-examination of the evaluative studies themselves. Instead, we concentrated on review, summaries and critiques of these studies which provide clearer delineation of the issues involved. From this review of the literature⁸ four basic dilemmas were identified:

- A) Unity-the conceptual dilemma
- B) Humanism-the value dilemma
- C) Abstracted Empiricism-the methodological dilemma
- D) Deparatism-the integration dilemma

These four areas are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive but provide a heuristic framework for understanding a highly complex and dynamic issue. To understand the framework it is crucial to realize that each dilemma represents both an important part of the problem and an element in its solution. Viewing each of the dilemmas as the main cause of the problem ignores their interactive dimension, establishing a part/whole dichotomy which forestalls a holistic solution.

A. Unity-the conceptual dilemma

The unity dilemma arose because theory has not been the guiding principle in evaluation research. Breedlove, among others, has pointed strongly to this fact as the main difficulty in evaluating casework.⁹ By not utilizing theory, researchers view casework as a totality, i.e., a black box, rather than an interactive process.¹⁰ This situation seems to be in conflict with the very essence of casework practice which stressed process both in the field and in academic training.¹¹ Without theory to guide one's understanding of what actually occurs in the process, two shortcomings are evident in the evaluative literature. First, as Geismar has noted, casework services are delivered to diverse target groups with a multiplicity of problems.¹² Thus, intervention is directed toward prevention of juvenile delinquency, elimination of mental illness, and reduction and prevention of dependence and poverty. The target groups served include people of all ages, races, ethnicities and socio-economic classes. The breadth of target populations and problems is reflected in research studies and indicates the vague limits and process of casework intervention. This diversity has also handicapped the basic intent of research to validate theory and advance knowledge because each study focused on different problem/target group combinations and neither cumulative information nor replication were attempted.

A second shortcoming is the tendency of the evaluative literature to standardize the process of interaction itself. Researchers tend to view social workers as a homogeneous group, failing to appreciate differences in style, knowledge, skill, motivation or experience and the way these variables interact with, and influence, outcome. A more appropriate assumption is that workers are heterogeneous. Researchers would be alerted to the nature of differences between workers and build this into

evaluation. The belief in homogeneity may account for many of the contradictory and confusing findings. Without controlling for worker heterogeneity, cancelling out effects within the internal operation of the study may occur. Thus, positive gains by some workers may be cancelled out by negative or no gains by others. This effect may also work within the caseload of a single worker depending on the nature of the interaction with the client.

It seems evident that both of these problems stem largely from the tendency to avoid testing and using theory in evaluations. Practice theory is directly related to the range of available interventive techniques and strategies. In addition, there exists insufficient knowledge by which to view the process dimension systematically. Consequently, researchers avoid the problem of theory by perceiving casework as a unitary process without considering whether a certain target group and problem area is appropriate or whether worker heterogeneity is an intervening variable in that process.

B. Humanism-the value dilemma

Social work's value foundation rests largely in the humanistic tradition; a belief system stressing the individual's fundamental goodness and ability for constructive growth and change.¹³ Within the field a continuum is discernible between the art and the science components of casework practice. Our humanist tradition tends to emphasize the art of practice; whereas research philosophy stresses the science component of the process.

This basic value conflict has led to a disparity between the perceptions of casework held by the researcher and the practitioner. Researchers stress the quantitative aspects of the casework process; the practitioner emphasized the qualitative. These differences cause the major focus of the evaluation effort to miss the interactive process through which much of casework treatment is conveyed. While attempting to quantify all relevant variables the researcher has difficulty accepting and utilizing many qualitative elements. These then go unnoticed and are not included within the evaluative framework.

The dilemma of conflicting values between research and practice is heightened when efforts to utilize an experimental or quasi-experimental design are implemented. Geismar points out that social work is generally engaged in a socially expected function, the exact utility of which can rarely be established because of the inability to produce comparisons in which no services were provided.¹⁴ His statement seems to preclude the use of a service/no service comparison, the basis of the experimental design. In its place, research has tended to substitute comparisons between a new service and a traditional service.¹⁵ This produces yet another problem, since the impact of the traditional service is unknown and therefore cannot be used to evaluate the impact of a new service. Both elements in the comparison contain unknown quantities. However, such a

situation reflects a basic belief held by practitioners: that any service is, in fact, better than no service. This assumption is based almost entirely on faith for, as Fischer has noted, the research evidence does not bear out this conclusion.¹⁶

Researchers compare services about which they know very little, while practitioners believe their activities with clients made a difference no matter what the findings suggest. A powerful stimulus develops which encourages the practitioner to ignore findings and the researcher to push even harder to prove the practitioner wrong. Humanist values in this case operate as a defense against more adequate research instead of as the motivating force for more information. In order to help clients, practitioners need more knowledge and in order to obtain that knowledge researchers need more information and the cooperation of the practitioner. Value conflicts within humanist traditions and the art/science continuum clearly impede the development of adequate evaluation efforts.

C. Abstracted Empiricism-the methodological dilemma

C. Wright Mills wrote in 1957 that sociology had developed a dependence on methods at the expense of more substantive work. Mills termed this practice "abstracted empiricism" and indicted sociologists for trying to emulate the natural sciences in the application of the scientific method for the development of all sociological knowledge.¹⁷ This criticism seems to fit the current state in casework effectiveness thinking. The focus on methods as an end in and of itself, as opposed to a means toward understanding casework, presents a serious problem. The evidence of this problem can be seen in two related observations:

- 1) researchers take great pains to present their methods sections in detail in order to meet the requirements of the scientific method.
- 2) The major criticisms levelled at these studies are almost always on methodological and not substantive grounds.¹⁸

Although abstracted empiricism gives highest priority to methods, there is a paradox operating within the evaluation of casework effectiveness. There appears to be a discrepancy between how the methods are employed in the research and their technical appropriateness.¹⁹ According to the writings of such authors as Edward Suchman there are three dimensions to the evaluative research process: input, output and design.²⁰ It seems that primary concentration is on the design with little, if any, attention directed to either input or output. Despite the fact that a research design is only the mechanism for systematizing data gathering and analysis it seems to be a substitute for a real understanding of what occurs in the casework process. In and of itself the quasi-experimental design adds nothing to our basic knowledge. Its use is predicated on a sophisticated and extensive knowledge base

which permits one to identify and control all irrelevant variables, to isolate cause and effect relationships.²¹ Without this knowledge the researcher will not ask the appropriate set of questions and must assume the existence of relationships. If this assumption is correct then use of an experimental or quasi-experimental design at this stage of development of casework effectiveness actually impedes knowledge building and research findings.

The misapplication of the input/output concept can be demonstrated more clearly by the tendency to mix priorities in assessing relevant variables on each side of the equation. Thus, quantitative measures of activity, i.e., hours of treatment, number of weeks in treatment, number of visits are used for the input side whereas qualitative aspects of behavioral change measure outcome. While this formulation is not necessarily incorrect it stresses the wrong variables on each side. Therefore, to understand input, i.e., casework, one must have an understanding of the qualitative aspects inherent in the process itself. Likewise, to understand output, i.e., expected goals, the quantitative aspects of behavioral change are critical if accurate measurement and reduction of value judgements is to occur. Unless priority is given to the appropriate orientation on each side of the equation, valuable information is lost which has a critical effect on research findings. This is not to say that quantitative aspects of input and the qualitative dimensions of output are not important, but they should play a secondary role in the process and be utilized to enhance the primary components in the analysis.

D. Separatism-the integration dilemma

Social work, as noted earlier, has not used effectively either the research process or its findings as a mechanism for understanding casework. Research usually remains outside the realm of practice and rarely has a direct impact on either practice or education.²² Despite this relationship researchers have not hesitated to accumulate evidence to answer the effectiveness question. Clearly, the need to summarize these studies exists although there are inherent pitfalls in this approach, as Fischer has discovered.²³ In trying to unify studies that have different population targets, different treatment goals, different objectives and no compatible understanding of casework, one is left with the most superficial analysis and forced to accept the weakest evidence to support conclusions. Fischer's definition of casework, goals and analysis all fit this general pattern, yet, he concludes his analysis with a resounding defeat for casework intervention. This type of effort is evidence of the lack of congruity between the field and research. Approaching knowledge building from this standpoint prevents practitioners from either trusting researchers or utilizing their findings. It creates the integration dilemma .

We have already pointed to the value conflict between research and practice, but stemming from that is a fundamental goal conflict as well.

This situation derives in part from the political environment within which casework evaluation occurs. Most studies are undertaken by researchers employed from outside the organization they are investigating. The need for agencies to show positive impact is becoming an overriding concern within the organization because of the funding pattern of casework services. Conflicting concerns emerge - the researcher's main interest is to further the knowledge base of the field; the practitioner's main objective is to help the client and maintain his job; and the agency administrators' concerns involve organizational survival in the political environment.²⁴ The disparity in objectives is one possible explanation why research findings are not met with enthusiasm by the practitioner. When findings are negative they can be used as a weapon to decrease financial support by foes of casework services. When findings are positive (rare at best) they are criticized on methodological grounds, effectively neutralizing their impact. It seems that evaluation studies can only hurt agency operation without providing any positive feedback.

The integration dilemma has one final dimension related to the absence of formal mechanisms for feedback of research findings into the field. Research tends to be presented in haphazard ways either in journals, at conferences or in small doses in the academic setting. There is no on-going system whereby research is disseminated to the field and comments and criticisms are entertained. Theory is not tested, so knowledge based on research findings is limited usually to the immediate organizational unit of the study itself. The nature of funding such research precludes its being used in a broad sense since it is usually the agencies who contract directly with the researcher. Research, in order to be utilized, must relate both to the wider needs of the field and to knowledge building and hypothesis testing. It has been an easy task for the social work community to avoid the effectiveness issue, as it avoids research in general, but the field can no longer take this stance. Action is imperative!

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

The analytical framework developed in the preceding section demonstrates the weaknesses in casework evaluation. At the same time the framework demonstrates the interrelationship between all four dilemmas. The extent of this relationship necessitates action for change that will enhance the operation of each part of the evaluation process. By taking such a stance, the combination of factors will maximize the potential utility of research findings. The following discussion attempts to develop a three-faceted holistic approach to evaluation.

The first facet entails the recognition of practice theory as the guide for evaluation. Without a systematic testing of theories acknowledged as important in casework practice, e.g., problem solving, ego psychology, role, communications, and task oriented, the black box which surrounds casework cannot be opened. The main task of theory is to provide the basic knowledge necessary to understand what casework is and how it operates.

theory can furnish greater comprehension of casework's major effectiveness in terms of problem areas and target groups. The elements which comprise the process of casework and heterogeneity among workers become clear and flow naturally from utilizing theory as a guide. In their attempt to understand the place of casework both Kahn and Geismar have expressed considerable doubts about the ability of casework to stand as a single service.²⁵ They view casework as a crucial component within a core of services which, taken together, can maximize desired outcome. But without adequate knowledge such views can neither be tested, nor, if correct, be implemented.

A better understanding of the relationship between theory and practice can occur only through an ongoing and systematic analysis of casework's operational characteristics. Identification of these dimensions provides the linkage between theory and practice and gives meaning to the input and output sides of the evaluation equation. Outcome can be determined only on the basis of what goes into the process, and this relationship is governed by theory and its implications for technique, problem area and desired objectives. The development of such a systematic testing of practice theory can be facilitated through the use of grounded theory.²⁶ Grounded theory is based on the observable as the basic unit from which theory is constructed. This approach can be used to validate predictions of outcome and process. Unlike formal theory construction and testing, grounded theory does not require rigid formulations before observations are made. Because social workers deal with observable reality this approach maximizes the need of the field in both theory development and testing as well as meeting human need.

Using practice theory as the guide for evaluation seems a logical first step, however agreement about this point is not universal. Some authors strongly believe that the development of better research technology, along with clarification of social work's goals, is both the necessary and sufficient course of action. The following general statements by Briar exemplify such a approach:

"It would entail a shift away from identification with particular theories and toward commitment to discovering and determining empirically what is effective practice, letting the theoretical chips fall where they may."

"...theory and other speculative materials would play an important supplementary and heuristic role but not a crucial one"²⁷

This approach, in essence, maintains the operation of the abstracted empiricist dilemma choosing to avoid the use of theory as a little more than supplementary to the research process. As was pointed out earlier,

better research technology cannot answer the underlying question about what casework is and what outcomes should be expected when it is applied.

Following from an understanding of practice theory, the second facet requires the improvement of research technology. In developing such technology the use of more qualitative methods on the input side and quantitative methods on the output side is essential. The work of David Fanshel is illustrative of such efforts.²⁸ In examining marriage counseling, he videotaped the interactions and used this material as the basis for understanding the process observed. By asking questions at the same time, client participation provided the reactive element to the worker's understanding of what had transpired.

The work of Fanshel is evidence that improved technology can provide useful information in research. His design demonstrates that input and output data can be used to generate and test appropriate practice theory. This exemplifies one solution to the abstracted empiricist dilemma.

However, testing theory and using appropriate methods do not speak directly to the problems of value and goal conflicts inherent in the humanism and separatism dilemmas.

The third facet entails resolving the separatism dilemma by maximizing the field's humanist tradition to achieve a closer link between practitioner and researcher. Integration of research, worker and administrative concerns through a re-orientation of priorities within the political environment can facilitate the gathering and analyzing of research findings. This re-orientation can be accomplished by stressing the mutual benefits of effective evaluation instead of their negative consequences. A coordinated series of activities could advance social work's primary concerns about casework effectiveness. With improved knowledge and information provided by researchers, practitioners could be more effective in meeting client need; enhanced client functioning could facilitate organizational survival by increased financial support. But, if the results are not always positive, there is at least the awareness that efforts for change and improvement are on-going within an organization. This openness serves as a weapon against criticism since it indicates the desire, if not the attainment, of the maximum impact possible.

The emphasis in the above discussion rests on accentuating the positive, rather than the negative. Too often, stressing differences (so characteristic of the literature in casework effectiveness) hinders or prevents constructive action. If the field is to respond to pressures for both internal and external accountability then a coherent framework for evaluating casework is essential. If we are to know whether casework is effective the questions must be formulated based on theory, using appropriate research technology within an integrated and unified environment.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

An attempt was made in this analysis to identify the barriers inhibiting the development of a comprehensive and holistic approach to the evaluation of casework effectiveness. The four dilemmas, unity, humanism, abstracted empiricism and separatism, provide a general framework from which concerted action for change can be directed. Systematic development and testing of theory through the use of grounded methods to adequately define input and output will provide the guidelines for appropriate qualitative and quantitative methods. The recognition of the humanistic tradition with its emphasis on values to help people can break down some of the barriers that currently separate participants of the process. The realities of the political environment must be recognized for what they are and turned around to benefit the field and those it serves. Action at this stage in the history of social work is critical but there must be general agreement about how action should proceed in order to achieve understanding as well as improve casework services. This is the only way to respond to the pressure for accountability.

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22. One notable exception to this point was the work of Reid and Shyne in their evaluation of brief vs. extended casework treatment. But even in this effort the findings were never replicated and the technique was lifted in tact into the academic curriculum.

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